

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Chapel in a Mine

In June 1863 Harper's New Monthly Magazine published an article by William V. Wells entitled "The Quicksilver Mines of New Almaden". The article was republished a year ago in the Academy Scrapbook. Reading that and then learning from the California Historical Society that a museum of early Almaden relics had been opened in the little community, we resolved to make a visit there.

The generous offer of Mrs. Bruce Boynton of Mountain View to present several items of interest to the Monterey History and Art Association for exhibition in the State historical buildings here took us to that locality first. Mrs. Boynton's gifts included a handsome handwoven robe in the familiar blue and white pattern and a bed quilt on which the very finest stitches and interesting pattern had been used in the quilting. A very old piece of early American glass and a china platter were also among the gifts from Mrs. Boynton. The four items are now on display at the Stevenson House.

As one enters the old town of New Almaden there is a marker placed at the side of the road by the New Almaden Historical Society which reads "First Mining Operations in California." Mining began in 1824 and the mines have been in constant production since 1845. Over one million flasks of quicksilver valued in excess of fifty million dollars, have been produced.

The community gives one a feeling of serenity – it is so peaceful and quiet. Many of the little old houses, all alike which line the street on the left, have been purchased from the original mine company and are now vacation homes. The trees which line the street are old and beautiful and the gardens are well kept.

What one sees today, in Almaden is entirely different from the description of the community as seen through the eyes of the writer of an article published in 1853. He wrote "This little mining city, with its fine hotels, the neat houses of the inhabitants, the excellent condition of the road to the valley, and the single street along which the buildings are erected leaves a favorable impression on the visitor and the whole establishment almost elegant in its appearance, is highly creditable to the company to which it belongs.

I attended the morning prayer of the miners in the subterranean chapel in the interior of the mine before an altar of the Virgin cut out of the solid rock. (Their prayer was the same as that of the boatmen on the San Juan river and the Lake of Nicaragua, which I had heard in 1850). It was a song addressed to the Virgin, the strain of plaintive notes in a few simple but most expressive modulations.

By the light of a torch, we pass through a damp passage of some length a sudden turn brings us into a vestibule where in a niche at one side is placed a crude shrine of the tutelary saint or protectress of the mine. Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe before which lighted candles are kept constantly burning, and before entering upon the labors of the day or night each man visits this shrine in devotion.

The Pony Express at Placerville, Calif., has in the past published a great deal of material on the New Almaden mine. The two chief contributors were Jimmie Schneider, the present custodian of the mine and Lawrence E. Bulmore, a son of Robert R. Bulmore, who was a member of the official staff there from 1878 to 1900. These articles have also been reprinted in the Academy Scrapbook.

Tradition says that Secondino Robles and Luis Chaboa first learned of the cinnabar at New Almaden in 1824. An old Indian gave them the location and said that the padres had used the cinnabar for paint at Mission Santa Clara.

The efforts of the pair to extract ore were futile. They thought it contained silver and did not know how to work it.

About 20 years later Capt. Andres Castillero visited Mission Santa Clara and learned of the cave from the Indians. With Father Real, he went to the place and gathered samples. The cave, it is said, had been dug by the Indians in prehistoric times. They used the red mineral for body paint. It was the captain who identified the ore as cinnabar and succeeded in extracting a few globules of the metal.

He went to San Jose and staked a claim of three hundred varas in all directions from the mouth of the cave. The Barron, Forbes and Company of Tepic, Mexico leased the claim and gave it the name. They operated the mine with success for 12 years.